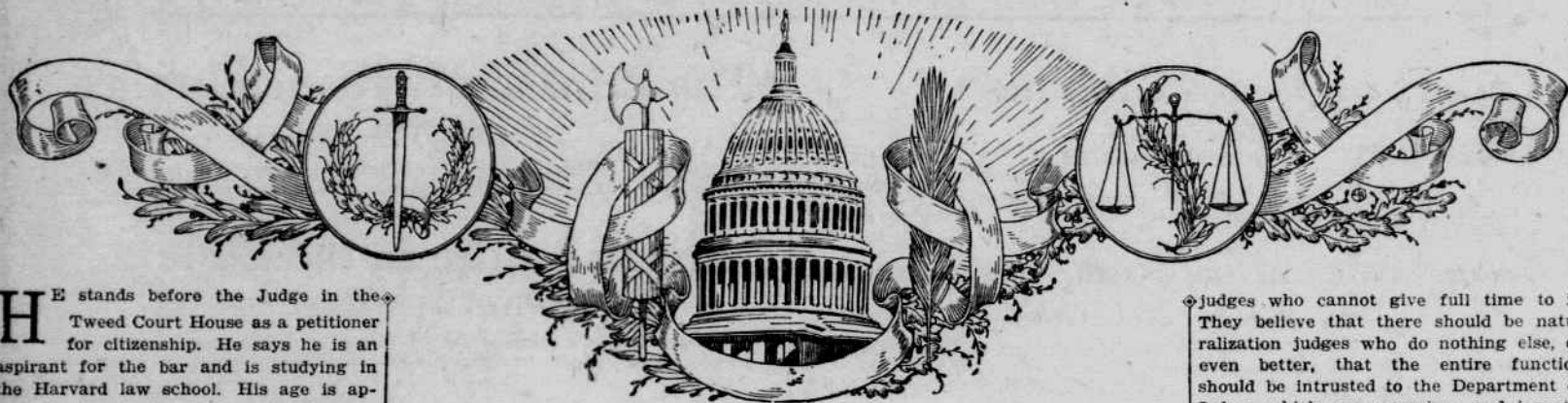


Grinding Out Our New Citizens



By THOREAU CRONYN.

HE stands before the Judge in the Tweed Court House as a petitioner for citizenship. He says he is an aspirant for the bar and is studying in the Harvard law school. His age is apparently twenty-four, his native land is Russia. His light hair is parted in the middle and glossed. Nervously he twitches his necktie. Beside him are his two witnesses. Like everybody else in the court room they have come in their bravest clothes and with shoes and faces shined to appear at their best in this crisis.

"What is our form of government?" asks the Judge.

"Republican." The young man also proves that he knows the names of President, Governor and Mayor. The Judge steps off the beaten path.

"Do you know," he says, "who Alexander Hamilton was?"

"Oh, yes."

"Who was he?"

The young man puckers his forehead, smiles hopefully, looks to the ceiling for inspiration, finds none, looks foolishly back at the Judge, and ventures, "Secretary of State." The Judge tries again. He inquires, "Do you know what the *Federalist* was?" "Oh, yes," the candidate answers. "It was a paper."

"Who wrote it?"

Memory triumphs over embarrassment and the candidate offers, "Hamilton." The Judge seems pleased. "Who," he asks, "wrote the Declaration of Independence?" Mental struggle is reflected on the young man's face, which is beginning to sweat. His mind's eye, searching frantically, stops at a gigantic, familiar signature.

"John Hancock," he cries, but the light that glows on his countenance fades as no answering beam comes from the Judge. "I-I mean," he gropes, "George Washington."

"No," the Judge says kindly, "it was Thomas Jefferson. I am surprised that a Harvard law student shouldn't know that. I advise you to study a little more the history of our country's institutions." This sounds ominous. "Go back and study some more," is a favorite way of tipping the black spot in our naturalization courts. The young man registers dismay. Has all his study brought him to failure in an elementary examination in American history? He glances despairingly at his two comrades, the witnesses, and is about to turn away. But the Judge, as he makes a notation in a big book, has the last word. "Admitted," he says.

A bustling young clerk hands the candidate a paper and motions him to one side. Another functionary leads him to a silk American flag, drooping on its standard, and makes signs indicating that he is to take hold of the flag with his left hand and raise his right above his head. He is not too dazed to obey. The oath of allegiance is read. "I do," he swears. In an adjoining room he signs his certificate. He is a citizen of the United States. He is entitled to all the rights and privileges of the same. He can get a pedler's license or be elected to office, or be admitted to the bar or join a lodge. He can at last confront and confuse the scornful with that supreme avowal and challenge, "I'm an American citizen and just as good as you are." And he can vote. On any election day, he can make his cross mark and

nullify the vote of Charles Evans Hughes, Dr. Parkhurst, Bishop Manning, Lyman Abbott, John D. Rockefeller or any one else he pleases, high or low.

Has the Judge made a mistake? Probably not. Even in the rush of the naturalization process, where no time is devoted to deep searching into the mind, character and disposition, where the mills grind fast and grind exceeding coarse, the Judge, it seems to the onlooker, has appraised the young man correctly. He happens to be one of the Judges to whom parrot answers to parrot questions mean nothing. He does not mistake temporary vacuity, caused by stage fright, for mental incapacity. He studies the candidate and notes a favorable report that the Government examiners have made. Apparently he thinks the young fellow could reasonably be expected to make a useful citizen, John Hancock or no John Hancock. And as for that, an observer gets an impression that this law student, away from the awesomeness of the courts, could probably recite the Declaration from end to end and name all the signers in their order. In another court the writer saw citizenship denied to an applicant because he could not name the Lieutenant-Governor of New York. Can you, oh, ever so intelligent reader?

Vast Difference in Methods.

By means of naturalization we convert aliens into citizens. A fairly important process, it may be supposed, but one of the least understood and most neglected. Citizenship, the only knighthood we have. A man or woman with shining eyes advances to receive it, ready to renounce all foreign potentates, to forswear nativity, to seal the compact of fidelity with a never to be forgotten vow, to kneel, if need be, by the flag—to become an American. Of course in a great many cases the motive is almost wholly selfish. Citizenship is desirable because it helps one in a material way, and too often that is about the only thought in the candidate's mind. But even the alien who craves citizenship because he can't lawfully trundle a pushcart without it might be lifted out of himself for a few moments at least, might perhaps entertain a vision some fraction of which would remain, if only the process of induction were sufficiently impressive. The ceremony of naturalization surely could be made significant. In reality, in some of our courts, it is the woodenest, most perfunctory performance imaginable. And going from court to court one finds no uniformity.

When a certain Federal Judge sits in Brooklyn the nearest to the ideal is attained. He has all the newly made citizens remain and listen to a short address by some well known person who can talk simple English and make a struggling mind understand the nobility of the American conception. As they pass out a Daughter of the American Revolution hands each one a small American flag. Another judge who is sometimes assigned to this same court will not tolerate Daughters, flags or lay speakers. His job is to preside over a court and his motto is speed, speed, speed. Some of the judges question a good

many applicants, others hardly any. Some reject them for trivial reasons, others are far too generous. Some make a hobby of naturalization, others seem to regard it as a bore. One of the Federal judges of the more conscientious type is not content when the applicant, answering the question, "Who makes our laws?" answers "Congress."

"What is Congress, a book, a man, a building, or what?" the judge pursues. If the candidate is rattled he gently leads him over the rough places. He doesn't care so much about text book phrases; he tries, in the all too short time at his disposal, to gauge intelligence, power of comprehension, character, and to find out what the man intends doing with his privilege when he gets it.

A certain Justice of the Supreme Court assembles the neophytes before him and stands up himself as right hands are raised and the oath is repeated slowly, intelligibly. But as a rule the oath is administered by clerks, and usually the clerk mumbles through it as if it meant nothing to him and couldn't possibly mean anything to any one else. One of the Supreme Court Justices required in the case of a married applicant that the wife take the oath as well as her husband. Under the law, up to a couple of weeks ago, that was not necessary, for the status of the wife followed that of the husband, but this particular judge felt that even outside of independent political rights a definite oath of allegiance should be taken by all who are admitted to citizenship, including minor children when they become of age. His innovation was generally approved, but in one instance it worked peculiarly. The applicant was all right, but his wife was an anarchist. She refused to go to court, she didn't want to be a citizen. The justice rejected the man. He said this was undoubtedly a hardship on the man, but "nevertheless it is of greater importance that an alien of the character his wife is alleged to be should not be admitted to citizenship."

The writer sat through two naturalization sessions to see what was going on. One was in the Federal Building—the United States District Court; the other in the County Court House—the Supreme Court of New York. To one of these tribunals must go every applicant for final citizenship papers. There are no naturalization judges who do nothing else. The regular judges are assigned in rotation to preside over the citizenship mill. A Judge thus assigned in the Supreme Court sits twice a week, in the Federal court once a week. The task is foreign to his customary duties; his mind is likely to be occupied with other and more congenial cases. Few of the judges like to be wrenched out of their environment. They haven't, or do not take, the time for painstaking examination. Too many candidates come up at one session. The result, in some of our courts, is a mob scene rather than an inquisition or a ceremony. Wisest critics of the present system regard as one of its chief defects the assignment of

judges who cannot give full time to it. They believe that there should be naturalization judges who do nothing else, or even better, that the entire function should be intrusted to the Department of Labor, which now examines and investigates the applicants before they appear in court.

Mob Scene Duplicated.

On the morning I visited the Federal court there were 115 names on the calendar. As each applicant has to bring two witnesses that meant the presence of 345 persons, assuming that all were there, and judging from appearances most of them were. It is doubtful if the room seats 150. The others were wedged behind the rail of the inclosure and along the walls, several ranks deep. And this was a light day, the grist being comparatively scant at this season. The judge ascended the bench at 10:30 o'clock. The idea was to get through before luncheon time. The court clerk, sitting at a table below the bench, rapidly called out the names in a loud voice, two at a time. Sometimes the candidates, buried in the crowd, couldn't extricate themselves quickly and come forward into the cleared inclosure. The clerk chided them for their slowness. Attendants hustled them along, not unkindly, but as if the clock was the main thing to consider. A representative of the naturalization bureau of the Department of Labor stood near the clerk. As the candidates—two at a time, with their witnesses making a batch of six persons—faced the clerk and answered to their names the Government man, referring to his records, said, "Approved," or "Should be denied" and rapidly gave the reason why. Usually the judge nodded, the clerk announced his decision and the oath of allegiance was taken in jig time. If the bewildered petitioners forgot to raise their right hands there was an attendant standing by to help them. He deftly crooked the petitioner's right elbow, tilted it upward and the trick was done. The clerk recited the oath rapidly and without change of inflection, looking around the courtroom or manipulating papers on his desk as he did so, with a final penetrating glance at the man before him.

There was an American flag near the Judge's bench, but nobody touched it or spoke of it. The applicants were not required to repeat the oath or to say "I do" when the clerk finished his rendition. Most of them nodded jerkily, and instantly a court attendant motioned them to step aside and march to a table where the certificate of naturalization, to be sent to them later, was signed. It must not be thought that any one was roughly treated. Brusque is the better word. The observer had a feeling that individuals were not to be censured, but that something was wrong with a system which placed a premium on speed and seemed, on its face, to recognize no deep significance in the act of naturalization. Yet the Judge who happened to be sitting is known to be capable and humane; the court attendants, get them out of the routine, are kindly, and as for the clerk who made such a perfunctory thing out of the oath of allegiance (maybe no one can administer it thousands and thousands of times without getting tired) no one is more alive than he to the ab-

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